



Commentary

## How Marketing Transforms in Flourishing Futures

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### ABSTRACT

As a discipline, marketing will need to shift as businesses and other institutions respond to the numerous crises now facing the world—either proactively towards transformative sustainable marketing, as it has been termed, or reactively in an effort to sustain business as usual. This paper argues that proactive transformation towards fostering flourishing for all will keep the discipline healthy and viable. That transformation, however, requires significant rethinking of marketing's core paradigm, purposes, and the performance metrics by which it is measured, which in turn influence key aspects marketing practice (including processes, procedures, and policies) and related power structures. All of these shifts will be emergent and hence unpredictable (though core questions can be considered as preparation), because of the nature of the complexly wicked context in which systemic change occurs.

### KEYWORDS

marketing transformation, system transformation, transformation, future of marketing

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## I. System Transformation and Marketing

Significant changes are in store for marketing as a discipline as it almost necessarily either flounders or flourishes in the context of radically transforming business ecosystems. Coming systemic changes, either purposeful or emergent, are likely to significantly shift businesses in the wake of numerous socio-ecological crises, briefly discussed below. Marketing as a discipline will shift along with the system. Here, I argue that proactively transforming the marketing discipline to what has been broadly called transformative sustainable marketing (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019) can advance the discipline's socio-ecological benefits as a responsible actor in societies, as well as keeping the discipline healthy and viable. As used here, the word 'sustainable' does not mean businesses sustaining or continuing business as usual. In fact, the connotation or implication of sustain as business as usual makes the word

sustain, despite its widespread usage and its link to the United Nations' globally agreed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), problematic. Instead, this paper focuses on how marketing as a discipline can contribute to a flourishing world for all, where all includes both humans and other-than-humans.

The original conceptualization of sustainability comes from the 1987 Brundtland Commission's use of the term 'sustainable development' (Brundtland, 1987), which some might call an oxymoron, given its (impossible) implication of continual economic/developmental growth on a finite planet (Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013; Jackson, 2009). As Brundtland used the term, 'sustainable development' had a distinctly ecological meaning. It was explicitly defined as 'meeting the needs the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Brundtland, 1987, p. 43), acknowledging the



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ecological limits of human population growth and (economic and related) activities. Of course, the terms sustainability and sustainable development have been widely adopted today, though hardly yet mainstreamed in business practice or, for that matter, marketing (Peterson, 2022).

Though many people and businesses retain the original ecologically-oriented conception, too often ‘sustainability’ in business contexts is corrupted to mean sustaining businesses (i.e., operating as usual), ensuring that businesses are sustained as successful enterprises without regard to their socio-ecological impacts. While that understanding of sustainability is of course important, it can allow the vital ecological aspects of the concept to get lost. Here, I use the term flourishing instead to connote businesses’ and marketing’s explicitly socio-ecological context to mean businesses and other human institutions that are operating in thriving societies working in harmony with Earth’s planetary boundaries and regenerative capacities (as well as connoting thriving ongoing enterprise). In its most radical formation, flourishing means operating in ecologically and societally regenerative ways that have the potential to avoid over-exploitation of nature’s and peoples’ resources and work to regenerate those resources within Earth’s regenerative capacity.

## 2. Why Business As Usual Won’t Do

The world of business and economics, not to mention human civilization, is in significant trouble today. Sustaining business as usual with today’s exploitative, continual growth-oriented, and narrowly-defined business purpose norms and solely economically-based expectations is a major source of the problems (Lovins et al., 2018; Monbiot, 2016; Waddock, 2016). In fact, businesses’ obsessive attention to growth and profitability at all costs is core to these problems, since neither human population (Cafaro et al., 2022) nor economies can grow endlessly on a finite planet (Cafaro et al., 2022; Ehrenfeld, 2019; Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2013). Indeed, the world today faces numerous global systemic challenges, now being called a global polycrisis. Polycrisis is defined as ‘a single, macro-crisis of interconnected, runaway failures of Earth’s vital natural and social systems that irreversibly degrades

humanity’s prospects’ (Homer-Dixon et al., 2021, p. 4). Think, for example, of largely uncontrolled climate change, species extinction, extreme weather patterns, seemingly unbridgeable political divides, and growing inequality, to name a few of these interacting crises.

Others label this context a world—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (Baran & Woznyj, 2020). Recognizing the potentially catastrophic implications of polycrisis, numerous entities, including peak business associations (Forum for the Future, 2021; World Bank Group, 2021b; World Economic Forum, 2020), intergovernmental panels and economists (Dasgupta, 2021; IPBES, 2019; IPCC, 2022) are calling for transformation or systemic change. Many others (Lovins et al., 2018; Simonis, 2012; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013, 2021) similarly argue strenuously that purposeful transformative system change in business and economic paradigms (Waddock, 2020b), performance, metrics, and practices (Waddock & Waddell, 2021a) towards circularity (Stahel, 2016; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021) and regenerativity (Forum for the Future, 2021; Hawken, 2021), and similar holistic shifts are needed to bring about a more ecologically and socially flourishing world.

Systemic change or system transformation is far from easy because entrenched interests, including how marketing is practiced, mean that many people and businesses are loathe to change away from the familiar towards a radically different (transformed) way of doing things. Transformation, after all, means radical or fundamental changes that implicate how business itself is practiced and go way beyond marketing, which will have to transform accordingly. Transformation means redefining institutional or system purposes, the paradigms or mindsets that inform those purposes, which Meadows argued are the most powerful transformation levers (Meadows, 1999), and the performance metrics that measure activities and performance. These three dimensions of change in turn influence operating practices and power relations with attendant resource flows (Waddock & Waddell, 2021a).

From a whole systems perspective, this situation is complexly-wicked, a combination of complex adaptive

systems (Anderson, 1999; Capra, 2005; Holling, 2001) combined and wicked problems (Churchman, 1967; Rittel & Webber, 1973). This complexly wicked context highlights the difficulty of actually achieving transformative action because it contains what Ackoff called messes (Ackoff & Lincoln, 1974), which are inherently hard to manage. Complex wickedness describes systems that are complex adaptive systems, interconnected, systemically dynamic, with emergent unpredictable dynamics, and that are best understood as whole systems (Waddock & Waddell, 2021b; Waddock et al., 2015), not in their parts. It is from this systemic perspective and with understanding of its implications, however, that ‘sustainable’ marketing arises and will be implemented (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019).

### 3. Marketing and Transformation

If there is one thing that is clear about dealing with systemic issues it is that problems, as Einstein famously said, cannot be solved with the same thinking that created them. By definition, system transformation asks us to step outside of existing patterns, norms, understandings, and ways of doing things—and begin to fundamentally rethink them. Thus, purposeful system change is about looking forward and doing things differently, and hopefully in doing so emerging a better system. In that sense it involves doing what is called prospective theorizing, thinking, and practice (Laszlo, 2021; Pavez et al., 2021), explicitly envisioning and building a future-oriented desired outcome. The implication for marketing research and practice is that it, along with other management disciplines, will change as our socio-economic systems, including businesses, (hopefully) actually begin to respond to polycrisis in significant and transformative ways—either proactively, purposefully, and constructively or in reaction—with all the implications thereof.

The business and economics implications of polycrisis are significant, ranging from potentially redefining the purpose of business away from today’s neoliberal understanding of it as maximization of (shareholder) wealth and continual (market) growth (Monbiot, 2016). It might move towards, perhaps, something more like the purpose that Donaldson and Walsh

(2015) described as collective value as core to a theory of business. Collective value would mean that all stakeholders, including the natural environment, actually benefit from the activities of businesses and economies. Business focus would evolve to serve all of life, not just shareholders (Lovins et al., 2018), truly serving many stakeholders (Freeman, 2017), and working regeneratively with nature in recognition that we all depend on her resources (Waddock, 2011). This systemic approach involves leaders, managers, and, not incidentally, marketers acting as stewards of whole systems, recognizing that individual businesses are part of a larger business ecosystem, which resides within social ecosystems, which themselves exist in the context of natural systems—and not, as too many would have it, the opposite (Waddock, 2020b).

Collective value (Donaldson & Walsh, 2015) can broadly be conceived as the common good. More broadly, such purpose can be conceived as fostering ‘what gives life’ to systems (Kuenkel & Waddock, 2019) or enhancing regenerativity (Fullerton, 2015), a concept that architect Christopher Alexander called ‘the quality without a name’ (Alexander, 1977). A complexity-based understanding recognizes key principles that are increasingly needed for thriving human, not to mention natural world, futures if human civilization is to continue without collapse (Diamond, 2005). Some argue that economies need to be circular (Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2013, 2021), in degrowth (Kallis et al., 2012; Thomson, 2011), emphasize *buen vivir* (good living) (Gudynas, 2011; Thomson, 2011), regenerative (Hawken, 2021), or ecological (Van den Bergh, 2001; Washington & Maloney, 2020), or doughnut economies (operating within planetary and social boundaries) (Raworth, 2017).

These ideas are just a few of many proposed for bringing about flourishing human-nature relations, involving marketing shifts that despite inroads are not yet mainstreamed (Peterson, 2022). For example, regenerative business practices, including in production, agriculture, and financial activities (Forum for the Future, 2021; Fullerton, 2015), involve different attitudes (paradigms) and practices, and mindsets

oriented towards enough rather than endless consumption. These shifts involve clear recognition of human interdependence with and relatedness to all of nature (Arrows, 2016; Hawken, 2021; Lovins et al., 2018), a perspective core to much Indigenous wisdom (Kimmerer, 2013; Harris & Wasilewski, 2004). Such perspectives could evolve practices that help preserve ecosystems and biodiversity, as well as enhancing productive capacity to support human civilization (Dasgupta, 2021; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021) for future generations—and even shift the trajectory of polycrisis, if widely adopted.

While policymakers have yet to take the necessary steps regarding this system transformation, the most recent IPCC climate report (Aldunce et al., 2023) has issued what some pundits called a ‘final warning’ about the catastrophic implications of an unchanged climate trajectory. Transformation—whether from systemic collapses or purposefully toward flourishing—is likely. In this context, it is useful for the marketing field to consider what the discipline of marketing might look like in a hopefully flourishing future where endless growth and increasing consumption are not the core goals of doing business.

#### 4. Rethinking Marketing’s Paradigm for a Flourishing Future

Let me first admit, that I am a management not a marketing scholar. That said, I have been thinking about generating purposeful systemic change that orients towards flourishing for all (Waddock & Waddell, 2021b; Peterson, 2022; Bentz et al., 2022; Waddock, 2024). A framework that covers ‘what’ changes in systems are needed during transformative change guides this discussion (Waddock & Waddell, 2021a). Three key overarching aspects of a relevant system shape purposeful change in business practice and influence marketing research and practice: paradigms, that is mindsets or perspectives that shape how people conceive the system and its functioning (Meadows, 1999), how the system’s purposes as defined and implemented by its participants, and the performance metrics by which the system is assessed. In turn, these three overarching systemic attributes influence the practices by which the system accomplishes its

work (i.e., operating practices) and the related power structures, relationships, and resource flows within the system that determine who and how the system works and with what resources.

##### 4.1. Paradigms

Paradigms are belief systems that shape peoples’ mindsets or mental models, which in turn explain how the world works, influencing attitudes, behaviors, and practices. Meadows claimed that paradigms (and the ability to transcend them) are the most powerful levers for effecting transformation (Meadows, 1999). Paradigms and related mindsets emerge from the stories or narratives, and the ‘memes’ (core units of culture like ideas and phrases) that people regularly use. When powerful and broadly accepted, these narratives become cultural mythologies (Dow, 1986) that provide key information about how the world ‘is’ and what values are important (Waddock, 2018, 2016). Social imaginaries or shared sets of common understandings, in this instance about collectively desired futures, emerge from these belief systems (Taylor, 2002) to become broadly-held paradigms.

Paradigms matter because they shape understanding of how the world ‘ought to’ and does work. Indeed, neoliberal economics is one of today’s most dominant paradigms (Monbiot, 2016; Pirson, 2017; Pirson & Lawrence, 2010), so widely accepted that it even serves as a cultural mythology (Dow, 1986). Neoliberalism’s tenets (or core memes) foster self-interested profit maximization, exploitive business practices in pursuit of growth, and market primacy at the expense of social and ecological ‘common goods’ (Pirson, 2017). Further, they are built on core beliefs of human exceptionalism, that is, the idea that humans are distinct and separate from nature (Catton & Dunlap, 1978; McDonald & Patterson, 2007). Neoliberalism has largely driven the idea of the common good out of regular parlance, even dismissing the idea of society altogether (c.f., Margaret Thatcher’s famous phrase, ‘There is no such thing as society’). It is, however, exactly those common, public, or shared ‘goods’ that are needed to provide a foundation for flourishing for all (e.g., unpolluted air and water, abundant natural resources, healthy forests producing oxygen, fertile soil, and so on). Marketing as a discipline



is subject to this broader dominant paradigm (Gordon et al., 2011). To achieve a flourishing world for all, this paradigm and its influence on marketing have to significantly change—emerging new social imaginaries in the process.

New social imaginaries fostering positive futures (vs transformation that simply happens as a result of socio-ecological dynamics) are generally articulated as sharing a core set of values or ‘memes’ and are fundamental to transformative change. That is because in the context of the wicked complexity described above, such change can at best be guided—it cannot be controlled or predicted (Waddock et al., 2015). Values on which many proposed new paradigms/social imaginaries are based typically include language aimed at bringing about just, inclusive, equitable societies in a flourishing natural world (e.g., Coscieme et al., 2020; Ergene et al., 2021; Folke et al., 2021; Vogel and Brien, 2022), as shorthand, flourishing for all. Here ‘all’ also includes other-than-humans. These types of imaginaries embed ‘plural values’, including ‘community, harmony, care, love, cultural diversity, tolerance, inclusion, and a meaningful life for all’ and intrinsically value nature rather than simply exploiting it for human use (Spash, 2020, p. 10). Marketers are—or could be—experts at creating and promoting new narratives that foster not further consumption, which (currently) involves excessive exploitation of people and nature, and materialism (Achrol & Kotler, 2012; Kemper & Ballantine, 2019; Pörtner et al., 2023). Rather, marketing might focus, with the right incentives, on something more associated with generating collective value and the common good.

Ultimately, this wellbeing-oriented approach to economics—and marketing’s function within economics, is defined in ecological economics terms as ‘social provisioning in accord with biophysical reality’, while eliminating the growth imperative (Spash, 2020, p. 10). The thing about transformational systemic change is that process is prospective (Laszlo, 2021; Pavez et al., 2021), meaning that it is a deliberate effort to bring about generally desirable changes synthesized above as fostering life, e.g., towards greater equity, justice/fairness, inclusiveness, and socio-ecological

flourishing for humans and nature (Ergene et al., 2021; Lovins et al., 2018). From a research perspective, this transformative approach to systems and especially marketing is ‘overwhelmingly understudied’ (Kemper and Ballantine, 2019, p. 281). Yet it is arguably essential for a flourishing future.

#### 4.2. Purpose

Purpose defines systems, articulating the reasons why they exist (Ackoff & Gharajedaghi, 1996). Purpose matters because as with paradigms, how the system actually accomplishes its work derives directly from its purposes and associated values. Human or social systems and institutions (socio-ecological systems) tend to have stated purposes, while the purposes of ecological systems need to be inferred (often around themes like thriving, surviving, reproduction). Gordon and Ballantine (Gordon et al., 2011) provide an overview of their understanding of the marketing discipline’s purposes, arguing, ‘Currently, marketing does exactly what it is supposed to do, selling more goods, encouraging consumption, and making profits. It is not inherently managed to deliver sustainability, thus, it’s potential to do so is often overlooked.’ I doubt that marketing practice has changed much since those words were written, even though the concept of societal marketing is generally taught to students undergraduate and graduate courses (Kotler et al., 2023).

These ideas go right to the heart of how marketing’s core purposes are conceived, framed, and implemented in practice. In a future that contends (far) more effectively with polycrisis and takes seriously the need to build societies with economies focused on flourishing for all, marketing most likely takes on a significantly new set of roles and practices. Achrol and Kotler (2012, p. 51) noted that this stance is a new ‘philosophical orientation is...tied to the well-being of the consumer and society [and, I would add, the natural environment] over the well-being of marketing management’ or individual businesses. It involves a systemic approach. It may well emphasize collective rather than individual value (Donaldson & Walsh, 2015), going well beyond mere profitability or financial concerns. These concepts imply a very different set of practices and power relations, particularly around marketing’s

vaunted 'Ps' framework, briefly discussed later.

#### 4.3. Performance Metrics

A common saying is that 'you get what you measure', which means that people tend to work towards whatever metrics are being used to assess their performance—and the same can be said about marketing. Key marketing metrics are aligned around profitability and market share growth, particularly increasing customers purchasing, retaining their loyalty, and advancing companies' reputation and brand, thus are associated with financial and customer results (Kamandulienė & Pilelienė, 2021). Financial measures are profitability, sales revenue, and cash flows, while common non-financial indicators include market share, quality of services, adaptability, customer satisfaction and/or loyalty, and brand equity (Clark, 1999; Morgan et al., 2022). These metrics have evolved into more sophisticated ones like firm customer equity, customer lifetime value, and customer engagement (Morgan et al., 2022).

An emerging synthesis known as the marketing performance assessment process involves a broad sweep of activities ranging from assessing outcomes, e.g., customer mindsets and behaviors, product-market, financial, and accounting outcomes, sometimes in the form of dashboards (Morgan et al., 2022). According to its originators, this process involves five stages: tracking, analysis, dissemination, receive evaluation, and utilization, all associated with increasing common metrics around profitability (Morgan et al., 2022), while generally ignoring socio-ecological or systemic concerns. But that orientation may not be as relevant or important in a transformed economic system where businesses have to contend with broader and more holistic assessments of their socio-ecological performance, sometimes termed social, ecological, and governance metrics (ESG). Performance measurement will likely evolve considerably towards holistic metrics that take into account the positive and negative impacts of marketing activities on human societies and the natural environment. An analogy can be made with GDP, which measures only economic activity whether beneficial or harmful (Costanza et al., 2014; Boarini & Ercole, 2013). This conceptualization is increasingly

being questioned in favor of more holistic metrics like the genuine progress indicator (GPI), which assesses both positive and negative impacts (subtracting out the latter), as well incorporating non-paid care and volunteer work (Lawn, 2003; Talberth & Weisdorf, 2017). Similarly holistic assessments of company performance and profitability require significant changes like incorporating what are now called externalities into full cost and lifecycle accounting and pricing mechanisms (Bebbington et al., 2001; Diaz et al., 2021; Jasinski et al., 2015). As broader metrics change toward more holistic ones, marketing measurement (and practice) will have to broaden considerably beyond customer/consumer metrics to encompass the beneficial and harmful impacts of marketing activity.

While measuring sustainable marketing practices is in its infancy, one study emphasizes that assessment needs to include three core dimensions: strategic integration (to the overall business strategy in its broader evolution), societal engagement, and ethical capabilities (Lučić, 2020). Along these lines, core dimensions of sustainable marketing that need to be assessed or measured are building strong relations with customers/clients, nature, and the social environment, aligned with ecologically-oriented, feasible, and ethical customer solutions following a 'triple responsibility' orientation—incorporating economic, environmental, and social elements (Lučić, 2020, pp. 2-5). This approach may shift over time, as marketing responds to transformations in businesses. Even in this articulation, it represents a far broader way of assessing marketing impact than solely a customer orientation does.

#### 4.4. Practices and Power Structures

The three transformational change dimensions just described drive two additional important aspects of transformative change: the (operating) practices and power structures with their attendant resource flows that determine how a given context works, who (or what) gets which resources, and who (or what) has status. The term practices is shorthand for the operating practices, processes, procedures, and policies that organizations and socio-ecological systems use to accomplish their purposes and get

whatever work is needed done (particularly applied to human institutions).

Power structures and resource flows determine who gets what resources and how, as well as the (status) relationships among actors in that system. Some observers argue power needs to be decentralized to achieving flourishing for all, generating intensive forms of localization, where decisions (and hence power) in larger systems is devolved to the most local level feasible (Kossoff, 2019; Norberg-Hodge, 2012). Businesses operating in healthy socio-ecological contexts in the future may well have to shift their internal dynamics toward more participative and collaborative arrangements built on foundations resembling natural evolutionary processes or interconnectedness and network relations (Atkins et al., 2019). These shifts foster stakeholder engagement, community, as well as responsible behaviors with respect to the natural environment and societies (Freeman, 2017).

Power and how it is structured is also related to understanding that in socio-ecological contexts much of what is being managed needs to be conceived as a commons—sometimes even a global commons to better recognize interrelatedness and interdependencies with each other and nature. Elinor Ostrom's rules for governing commons (Ostrom, 1990) can be useful guides here for distributing and allocating resources, and ensuring that everyone has needed voice or participative capacity. In these types of contexts oriented towards flourishing, collaboration (synergy) is as important as, perhaps more important than, competition, as biologists and cultural evolutionary scientists point out (Atkins et al., 2019; De Waal, 1996). Note that the implications of these structures are distinct from the way most of today's typically top-down, hierarchical organizations and institutions are structured, representing more of a network structure with relatively equitable participation by engaged parties.

The central practices in the marketing discipline in the future need to reflect some combination of the marketing mix applied to sustainable marketing (Gordon et al., 2011) and, more explicitly transformative sustainability marketing (Kemper &

Ballantine, 2019). The core of the marketing mix is generally described as a set of 'Ps' that covers the traditional four Ps—product, place, promotion, and price, sometimes adding an additional three or four Ps, that include variations of people, processes, programs, and performance (Ahuja, 2016), although other possibilities have been suggested as well (Ahuja, 2016; Rafiq & Ahmed, 1995). However designated, all of these Ps formulations aim at helping companies sell more goods and services to customers.

Socio-ecological, particularly ecological, constraints and considerations are generally not considered in the marketing mix. They are, however, becoming more explicit in relatively recent marketing paradigms related to the base of the pyramid, social, and sustainable marketing (Achrol & Kotler, 2012; Kemper & Ballantine, 2019; Peterson, 2022). Although (particularly transformative) sustainability marketing (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019) has not yet become the mainstream (Peterson, 2022), marketing as a discipline ultimately needs to become a central player in shifting understandings about materialism and consumption, as well as what and how products (and services to some extent) are produced and delivered (Achrol & Kotler, 2012).

In marketing practices in particular, things will shift rather dramatically as the very products and services produced by firms change to meet ecologically-induced constraints. The ecological imperative will mean that firms simply will not be able to constantly push endless growth (in sales, market share, profits, as examples) and stay within acceptable planetary boundaries (O'Neill et al., 2018). Fundamental business models will potentially emerge around high quality, durable, repairable, and reusable products. Transformation towards flourishing socio-ecological systems could mean fundamental changes in what is sold, how it is sold, and who actually owns products (and services?), as well as who is responsible for them at the end of their life cycle. Business models will shift accordingly (in addition to the full cost and life cycle accounting discussed briefly above), perhaps to what is termed 'servicizing', in which companies basically lease access to the services or goods provided by various products, while retaining ownership—and

hence responsibility—for the product (White et al., 1999). That model would be similar to what is already in practice in Germany, where ‘take back’ laws require companies to recycle their products at the end of their useful life.

## 5. Implications, Discussion and Conclusions

Marketing, like every other human activity, happens within a socio-ecological context, consisting of the natural environment on which we humans are completely dependent. The social system is comprised of numerous institutions, like governments at multiple levels, ongoing businesses and industry ecosystems, and consumers holding varying mindsets (paradigms) about their own and business roles (to name a few of the contextual factors). As argued elsewhere, businesses—and marketing practices—are unlikely to change without shifting this entire ecosystem towards new purposes, supported by new paradigms (narratives), and performance metrics (Gordon et al., 2011; Kemper & Ballantine, 2019; Waddock, 2020a).

Given that transformation and its implications are inherently unpredictable, with characteristics of wicked complexity, shifts in actual marketing and marketing research practices will necessarily be an emergent process. It will ultimately be up to marketing practitioners and scholars to determine what the operating practices of the discipline are as the context around them shifts. Here there are more questions than answers, with significant implications for both practice and scholarship. For example, can (how can) marketers be involved in promoting the common good or new flourishing based social imaginaries? How would this activity be paid for? Can (and how can) marketers help companies emerge production and consumption patterns that work in harmony with societies’ needs and ecological constraints without pushing endless growth?

What are the engines of business thriving in such contexts? How do marketing’s (four to eight) P’s play out in a world of constrained growth and consumption, in ways that allow for a healthy marketing discipline? How might marketing play a role in building healthy places (as opposed to product placements), and promote products that truly are sustainable—produced

at Earth’s regenerative capacity? How might marketing help companies generate and market healthy (not overly processed) food products, grown in regenerative ways in an agro-business model where land is seen as sacred, other-than-human animals are treated humanely, and regenerative practices abound (Forum for the Future, 2021; Hawken, 2021)?

How can marketing help to ensure solid, albeit probably stable not endlessly growing, returns to companies’ bottom lines, without endless growth, and that enable the company to thrive, sell products that are highly durable, high quality, and made to last rather than building in planned obsolescence (Kerschner, 2010)? As recent attempts by business-friendly entities like the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, the World Bank, and the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (and others) to foster circular economies that preserve ecological and biological resources suggest (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013, 2021; World Bank Group, 2021a; World Bank, 2021; Forum for the Future, 2021), these ideas are not mere pipe dreams but rather the leading edge of today’s business practice.

All of these consideration imply that a very different approach to researching and understanding marketing, markets, companies, and customers is also needed, one that cannot readily be quantified, measured, or assessed piecemeal and can only really be assessed in retrospect. That said, the process of envisioning marketing’s future—in a world of flourishing for all—is embodied in prospective theorizing: envisioning, theorizing, and figuring out how to bring about positive and desired changes (Laszlo, 2021; Pavez et al., 2021). Prospection is very different from today’s mostly retrospective assessments of what has already happened—which do not project well into an uncertain future. Prospective theorizing involves enacting desired futures, and requires a different scholarly (and practice) approaches, based in visioning and dialogical engagement processes (which can be empirically handled and studied (e.g., appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, 2001), Theory U (Scharmer, 2009), three horizons mapping (Sharpe, 2015), and future search (Weisbord & Janoff, 1995), as examples).



That stance also means moving from backward-looking empirical work that posits ‘objectivity’ towards recognition that we are all embedded in this work. Understanding that might move marketing towards action research, where the researchers participate with others to co-generate the desired future, including what products are needed, developed, and marketed. It would also require not pretending that objective research is possible, i.e., research is where the researcher is viewed as standing outside the system looking in as if the system undergoing change were somehow separate from the researcher (Bradbury et al., 2019). Instead, this approach recognizes that we are all part of the system undergoing change, and that given interdependence and relatedness there is no such thing as objective. All living systems are complexly embedded, interconnected, dynamic. Interventions, even observations, matter because they change perspectives and practices, even subtly, which changes the system. Marketing, which has developed highly sophisticated ways of reaching and influencing people certainly has important roles to play in fostering accompanying mindset/paradigm change, as the discipline learns to put its many skills to use for the common good.

In conclusion, marketing is going to transform as the socio-ecological systems around it transform to cope with—or possibly more likely—react to polycrisis, i.e., climate change, ecosystem collapses, biodiversity losses, massive pollutions, growing inequality and social unrest, and any number of other interacting issues. That transformation will either be happenstance—occurring because of the VUCA world’s own turbulence and dynamic systemic changes—likely not in positive ways. Or it will be part of purposeful sets of systemic changes that reorient businesses, economies, and, yes, the marketing field towards producing collective value. By taking a forward-looking stance now, marketing as a discipline can prepare for these shifts and understand their implications for practice and for scholarship.

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LUMINOUS  
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